

The COMMONWEAL

VOLUME XXXVI August 28, 1942 NUMBER 19

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THE COMMONWEAL is indexed in the Reader's Guide, Catholic Periodical Index and Catholic Bookman.

Commonweal Publishing Co., Inc., 386 Fourth Avenue, New York
Annual Subscription: U. S. and Canada, \$5.00; Foreign, \$6.00

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Tentative Essay in Morals

ONE of the crucial theses of Major de Sever-sky's best seller, "Victory through Air Power," is based upon a distinction elaborated by the Russian flyer and designer. He points out that there are basically two ways of waging modern war—the war of possession and the war of extermination. In the first, the object is to win a military victory with as little damage as possible to the productive capacity of the enemy one intends to exploit after conquest. The second aims at the destruction of an enemy one esteems dangerous but useless for future exploitation. Of the first, the classic example is the German campaign against Russia; of the second, the utter and wanton destruction from the air of a large part of Rotterdam. Obviously, all other things being equal, the first sort of warfare costs you more in life and money than the second, yet *on the whole* it is the sort of warfare which pays the best dividends to an aggressor who wants lands and people to exploit, whereas the second is the best defense for a non-aggressor whose principal object is to stop aggression, not to win more territory or subjects. Logically, therefore, he indicates, our aim should be the maximum possible destruction of Germany and Japan. For modern air-war seemingly makes possible what hitherto would have been utterly illusory—the destruction of a victorious army's home bases by an opponent who may be defeated on land and sea, but gain superiority in the air.

Assuming for an instant that all this is strategically sound, what are the moral aspects of the matter? Once again modern technical achievement opens up to the moralist a problem which even twenty-five years ago would have been largely academic. It is the same sort of moral problem as that offered by the sovereignty of small states. Must we still insist on a small nation's right to *absolute* sovereignty when that sovereignty can jeopardize the lives and happiness of far larger neighboring populations? Can we tolerate the *deliberate*, wholesale killing of civilians in order to eradicate the threat constituted by the armies fighting for those civilians? Shall we admit that when we are confronted with two alternatives, both unjust, it is our duty to select the lesser evil? And how do we determine which is the lesser?

Raising moral issues in times of crisis is always thankless: if one's conclusion is to justify what also looks to be the most expedient, the cynical are likely to jeer; if one's conclusion disapproves the expedient, patriots become irritated at what they dub "unrealism."

We believe that de Seversky's strategy is bad from a moral point of view—and can be very short-sighted from the point of view of expediency. We believe it reflects merely another instance of a generic disease: imitating our enemies' disregard for principle because of a lack of faith in principle.

Of course, as in all moral issues, the question of intent, explicit and implicit, is involved. If large-scale air raids on certain key cities, involving only *incidental* (if considerable) destruction of civilian life, can produce a quicker victory and a quicker release for those now suffering thrall-dom, then the moral problem is different, and there can arise no question over the expediency of such action. So, also, the moral justification for insisting upon the *absolute* sovereignty of states has been vitiated by new circumstances which make such sovereignty threaten the general welfare of mankind. But if your strategy is, despite all official disclaimers, to be an *intended*, systematic extermination, as practiced by our enemies in Rotterdam or Greece or Yugoslavia or Poland, then the situation is reversed. Morally, just as would be the total extinction of a nation's sovereignty, it is clearly intolerable, *no matter how good the end in view*. Politically it is likely to be ruinous, for it can so easily plant seeds of hatred, which will grow into thistles to crowd out the future peace; and we shall find ourselves in a war anew, for which we all too desperately share the blame.

Thus we are glad that so far the RAF has *not* sent out a thousand planes a night. (They can *talk* about it all they want—that's a different matter.) To do so would look altogether too much like a deliberate policy of extermination. An occasional action such as that of Cologne (cer-

tainly a borderline case) can perhaps be justified, despite incidental slaughter of civilians; but to generalize such tactics into a primary strategy is to fall into the very trap the devil has sprung upon our enemies and seeks endlessly to spring upon us.

Shacks and Housing

THE War Workers' housing crisis underlined by the current *Life* story on Detroit must be viewed against the background of national housing difficulties of the past decade. If the creation of new industries can bring acute dwelling shortages when the nation is at peace, and if both urban and rural slums are so characteristic of the normal American scene, small wonder that the vast shift of population to man our gigantic war industries should have resulted in shortages in Washington, Detroit and other war nerve centers. The Administration has long been conscious of the housing problem; in the past ten years it has worked out various techniques to meet it. Yet *Business Week* reports that only 200,000 new homes are to be completed by private industry this year as compared with 500,000 in 1941, and new government dwelling units will be scarcely more than 300,000. Housing has always been a slow process; now there are grave shortages of essential building materials. Talk about prefabricated housing has been going on for years, yet despite its adaptability to the more temporary homes called for by the new war industries, only 43,188 prefabricated demountable homes are planned for 1942. Not a single one (apart from impromptu specimens) has been completed in Detroit.

The scale of the nation's needs here is indicated by a few statistics on the Michigan metropolis. Donald Nelson estimates that one-sixth of America's war production, or \$72,000,000,000 worth of armaments, is expected of Detroit next year. Alvan Macauley, chairman of the Automotive Council for War Production, gives the same figure for peak war production on the part of the nation's automobile industry (which is concentrated largely in the Detroit area) and reports that deliveries in July of this year were about two and one-half times January deliveries. Consider the new manpower required to make this possible. Yet so far this year only two housing developments comprising 676 family units have been completed in Detroit, one of them the Sojourner Truth Homes, where for a time the Negro tenants for whom they were intended were forcibly prevented from taking rightful possession. By the time the snow flies there is no telling how many thousands of war workers and their families will still be living in shacks, trailers and tents without adequate sanitary facilities or community advantages. Here is a sector on the production front which deserves more general attention than

it is getting, and a problem which cannot be solved by the coming of peace.

New Order Justice

IMPATIENCE, ignorance, misplaced enthusiasm, unreflecting patriotism—all these things today even more than malice can threaten the liberties of the citizen. It is so easy to feel that when you are up against nazi-fascists, the bars are down. Away with legalism! Get the bums behind bars the quickest way you can! They don't deserve a break.

Very few Americans appreciate how essential to human liberty and to a well-ordered state is the matter of legal procedure and tradition, however cumbersome and even futile they may seem. Especially is this true if such procedure has grown up organically in a state, as the result of trial and error, rather than as something imposed for theoretical reasons. Thus often wholesale reform, based upon what looks like a watertight set of logical principles, can produce a greater disorder and more unforeseen injustice than a silly-seeming and apparently wholly illogical (yet human) growth by accretion.

Basically that is why we should instinctively distrust juridical procedure and acts which broadly violate tradition or precedent. That is why we deeply regret and reprehend the action of the Attorney General and the Federal Grand Jury in the recent mass indictment on conspiracy charges of 28 men and women, most of them crackpots, all of them enemies of democracy. A number of things about this indictment are alarming and threaten the rights of all citizens by establishing precedents and weakening tradition. Mass indictments for conspiracy tend to create false attribution of guilt through association. Even a genius would have difficulty in weighing fairly the degree of individual guilt of twenty-eight different persons all being tried at once. These people come from all over the country; dragging them away from their home districts to be tried in such a perfervid atmosphere as war-time Washington looks like a tyrannical trick. And why, if the utterances cited in the indictment are seditious and the results of a "conspiracy," why are only the small-fry who expressed such opinions indicted? Where is Father Coughlin? Where are the proprietors of certain large and rich newspapers? They look on the surface to have been just as much involved as the Griffins and Dillings and Pelleys.

THE COMMONWEAL has no liking for fascists, American or otherwise. Yet it finds in the methods of the Department of Justice something as much to be condemned, considering its high source, as the preachments and writings of the crackpots presently indicted, however dangerous they may be.

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